

Iago and His Motives under Modern Eyes

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Abstract—Shakespeare's plays depict the turn from the pre-modern era with its traditional values and mores into the modern approach towards life and individuals. These plays deal with specific questions that were significant in Shakespeare's time and his cultural contexts, such as the mores and meanings of Christian values in the society, the rise of humanism, monarchy and questions related to the economy. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's questions on religious values and the modern individual seem to be relevant today, in particular, with the recent post-modern discussions on the limits of secular rational modernity and a return to a new condition of believing in contemporary societies. Taking the character of Iago as my reference point, I shall attempt to reread Iago's actions and psyche in light of a critique of the narcissist character along with the modern individual's rational attitude towards life.

Keywords —Iago, modernity, Christianity, rationality, emptiness, superiority.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Othello, Shakespeare introduces Iago to the audience as a person full of evil and hatred from the first moment of the play. The play starts with Iago persuading Roderigo to wake Desdemona's father, Brabantio, up saying "Call up her father, Rouse him...poison his delights...do, with like timorous accent and dire yell." (I. i. 64-65, 72) Then, Iago confesses his hatred for Othello to Roderigo saying, "... I hate him (Othello) as I do hell-pains . . ." (-I. i.150). And, as the play progresses, Iago turns out to be a villain who conspires not only to destroy Othello's life but that of all those who trusted him without clear reasons. This led some critics like T.S. Coleridge to claim that Iago's actions stem from his "motiveless malignity", as a result of his love for evil for its own sake and hating "good in itself" (Bradley, 1951, P.209).

Coleridge's aforementioned argument of "motiveless malignity" could have satisfied the Elizabethan audience who explained the action in terms of the dichotomy of virtue and vice (Scragg, 1968) and therefore "did not expect every character to produce one rational explanation for every given action" (Bradbrook, 1983, p. 59-60). Such an argument, however, seems to be hardly convincing to the modern rational mind, which seeks to find a plausible explanation for each action. Therefore, and given that "men's attitudes

to the issues which appear in Othello have greatly changed between Shakespeare's time and our own..." (Holloway, 1961, p. 155), I am encouraged to re-read Iago's behaviour in light of modern thought that could satisfy the modern individual understanding without taking the text out of its original context.

Rereading Iago's behaviour through the modern lens, I am going to contradict Coleridge's claim of Iago's "motiveless malignity" through trying out two arguments. Firstly, I argue that Iago's motives lurked inside his own narcissist character that believed deeply in the individual's willpower. Secondly, Iago's attitude could be read in light of a recent post-modern critique of the modern rational attitude. This attitude endeavours to suppress and negate the meaning of spiritual feelings for the sake of a claimed "civilized" rational individual.

In the following pages, I shall trace the unlimited self-love in Iago's character and how it controls his attitude and reactions. Then, I shall attempt to shed light on Iago's sense of superiority and his feelings of "emptiness". A brief conclusion in the last section sums up my argument.

II. THE HIDDEN FACE OF IAGO: IAGO AND HIS UNCONDITIONAL SELF-LOVE

In "Othello", critics argue that Iago is the most perplexing character among all Shakespearean villainous characters because he did not give any convincing reasons to justify his misdeeds and massive desire to destroy the lives of those around him. Although Iago tried hard to justify to the audience his hatred by, firstly, introducing himself as an ambitious person who had been unfairly treated by Othello. Othello gave Cassio a military promotion which Iago deserved, it became even apparent that Iago is not interested in taking the position of Cassio but in destroying him.

Secondly, Iago hated Othello even before Cassio was promoted. He repeatedly professes his hatred for

Othello, he says "I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again," he says. "I hate the Moor: my cause is heartened; thine hath no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him." (I.iii.373)

Then, on another occasion, Iago claims that he was a wronged husband and his wife betrayed him with Othello. Iago says:

... I hate the Moor;

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets

'Has done my office. I know not if't be true;

Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,

Will do as if for surety. (I.3.378-82)

And, therefore, Iago threatened that he would take revenge for his honour, he says,

"And nothing can, or shall content my soul

wife. Till I am even'd with him, wife, for

Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor

At least into a jealousy so strong

That judgment cannot cure." (II. i. 331-

5.)

Interestingly, Iago's behaviours toward his wife do not reflect his love for her. On the contrary, he despises her. For instance, when Emilia steals Desdemona's handkerchief for him, he comments on her action by saying, "It's a common thing—to have a foolish wife" (III. iii.302-304). In the essay "The Polarization of Erotic Love in "Othello," Arthur Kirsch affirms this idea, he writes: "Although Emilia's portrayal is very complex, it is nevertheless obvious that Iago has little affection for her." (Kirsch 1978, p.758)

Furthermore, in a comparison between Othello's reaction when he was told about his wife's adultery and Iago's reaction when he suspects a vicious relationship between Othello and his wife it shows that; "while Othello reacts to his wife's adultery by spying on her and obsessing about knowing her infidelity for sure, Iago focuses all of his energy on Othello and not on the claimed unfaithful wife. This could add to the argument that Iago's motive is to destroy Othello and that he is indifferent about "the stealing of his wife's heart".

On another occasion, Iago states that he fears that Cassio may spoil the relationship between him and Othello, and once again Iago claims that he suspects that Cassio has deceived him by having an affair with Emilia. He, however, contradicts himself and confesses that he is not certain about this suspicion.

Although one can argue that Iago's circumvented ways of revealing his real motivations for his vicious behaviour make them less convincing, critics argue that the problem with Iago is not that he did not have motives but that he did not reveal his real reasons, and that what we get from Iago's direct words "is only part of the truth, an evidence of things not seen, or not entirely seen". (Eisman 1995, p. 177). Indeed, unlike many other Shakespearean characters, Shakespeare chose not to psychologize about Iago. Throughout the play, we know Iago through the others and his actions towards them. The final scene, in which Othello challenges Iago to express and explain himself ended up in Iago's famous lines: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak a word." (V.ii.303).

Following the aforementioned argument which suggests that Iago reveals just part of the truth behind his hatred on the stage what could be his real motives to hate those around him?

Here, I am going to reveal another motive behind Iago's vicious actions following his psychological reasons. I argue that Iago's motive can be ascribed to his psyche.

Critics argue that Iago's egoism and unconditional self-love can be considered one of the key reasons for his behaviour. It seems that Iago's ego plays the most important role in his life. In this context, one can start by referring to the choice of the name "Iago" itself which seems not a random choice but it carries an implicit message. The name Iago "unfolds from the Italian io, Latin ego" (Adelmann, 1997, p. 127) a suggestion that manifests itself in the omnipresence of the "I" of Iago in his speech; for instance, when Iago

describes his injured "I" he says, "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.11); "And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof... must be lee'd, and calm'd" (11. 28-30); "And I, God bless the mark, his worship's ancient" (1. 33).

Also, Soellner comments on Iago's judgement of himself writing, "is not only arrogant but also egotistic and immoral; he compounds the sin of pride with the sin of self-love. He never yet found a man who knew "how to love himself" (I.iii.315) except, of course, himself." (Soellner, 1972, p. 265)

Iago's unconditional self-love and sense of superiority, which are considered the essential factors that control his feelings and actions towards those around him, created an insecure character of him. Iago radically changed from an honest person to a devil destroying the lives of those around him without showing any regret for their suffering. In this context, can one read Iago as a narcissist and self-centred character?

Sam Vaknin in "Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited" argues that a narcissist is in love with his own reflection, therefore he loves people's impressions of him, and thus endeavoured to maintain an admirable image by satisfying people around him, not because he appreciates those people, but because he uses those people as a mirror that reflects the beauty of his self (Vaknin, 2003, p. 27).

Vaknin's argument about the narcissist character explains to a great extent why Iago endeavoured to gain the trust of all around him and succeeded in that as it manifested itself in the opinions of those around him. For example, when the Duke commanded Othello to leave for Cyprus and to designate an officer to deliver documents from the Senate, Othello appoints Iago to be that officer and describes him as "A man he is of honesty and trust" (1.3.284). Once again, when Othello asks Cassio to take care of the festivities in Cyprus, Cassio answers that he has already commanded Iago to do so, here, Othello comments that "Iago is most honest" (2.3.6)

Desdemona also describes Iago as a good man. For instance, when she gives Cassio her promise that she will help him get his job back, Emilia says that Cassio's difficult situation deeply grieves Iago, here Desdemona comments, "O, that's an honest fellow." (3.3.5)

Such good opinions of Iago illustrate that Iago had exerted a great effort to achieve his ultimate goal, which is to preserve his admirable image in the eyes of those around him to prove for himself his "uniqueness and grandeur" (Vaknin 2003, p. 27). But Iago's belief of himself as unique had been attacked when Othello gave Cassio the position, which Iago believes should have been given to him. Iago felt that Cassio's promotion over him attacked his honour since he, Iago, claimed that he deserves this position and that he was treated unjustly. He says "I know my price; I am worth more no worse a place." (1.1.12)

Iago thinks of himself as a more efficient soldier than Cassio whom he describes as merely "...a bookish theoretic" (1.1.24) guilty of "mere prattle without practice" (1.1.26); and a person who had "...never set a squadron in the field, nor the division of battle knows" (1.1.21-22). Here, like all narcissists, Iago started to blame his failure on the unfair outer world believing that such promotion "...goes by letter and affection, And not by old gradation" (1.1.36) and felt that his pride was attacked when Othello chose Cassio to be his lieutenant. Here, Marjorie Pryse, in her article Lust for Audience: An Interpretation of Othello, argues that "Iago was not interested in the promotion in itself and that his resentment to Othello after he promoted Cassio was because Othello "has refused to listen to Iago and the advocates Iago sends. As far as Othello is concerned, Iago does not exist. He does not recognize Iago's worth, and Iago is offended." (Pryse, 1976, p. 461).

Moreover, Iago also destroyed not only Othello and Cassio's lives after Cassio was promoted but also that of Desdemona, who did not play any role

in Cassio's military promotion. Why did Iago hate Desdemona?

Critics argue that Iago also wanted to destroy Desdemona when he thought that she was becoming a threat to his own image; when Desdemona asks him about his opinion of women, and here Karl Zender in his article *The Humiliation of Iago* (1994), maintained that "In posing her challenges, Desdemona places Iago in a situation...of being required to express affection at someone else's request" (325). Iago felt that he was humiliated and his thus "Anger at Desdemona vies with anger and Cassio and Othello as Iago's primary motive in the remainder of *Othello*; and this anger...decides Desdemona's fate," concludes Zender (330).

To sum up, one can argue that Iago could strongly represent an egoistic character that was always faithful only to his own self-interest. He adopted the virtue of honesty just to satisfy his own sense of uniqueness in the eyes of the others and turned into a villain when he felt that his pride had been attacked.

III. THE DILEMMA OF IAGO'S SUPERIORITY AND MODERN RATIONALITY

3.1. Iago's Lurked feelings of Emptiness:

Charles Tylor starts his book *A Secular Age* (2007) questioning the nature of secular modernity and the meaning of what he called "sense of fullness". Tylor argues that all societies tend to find an answer to the question of "what constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What do we most admire others for? (Cf. 2007, p. 16). Here he comes up with the term "fullness." He maintains that "Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfilment, where we feel ourselves there (2007, p. 5).

In line with Tylor's aforementioned term of "sense of fullness," one can argue that Iago's character could be a representation of the dilemma of the void of religious aspect in human's psyche.

One can see this in Iago's desire to destroy all who he consider "full" and "all in all" unlike him shows his envy of those people as Adam Philip says "Tell me what you need to spoil and I will tell you what you want," (Philip in Boris 1994: vii-xi, esp. ix.). Although Iago endeavours to show his high opinion of himself it seems clear this is just a fragile mask to cover his feelings of inferiority when he compares himself with those whom he is trying to prove foolish and he himself envies.

Iago always affirms his sense of "emptiness and nothingness, he says, "I am not what I am"; "I am nothing, if not critical" (2.1.119). Iago feels inferior to Othello who "has the presence, the fullness of being, Othello is "all in all sufficient" (4.1.261), a "full soldier" (2.1.36), whose "solid virtue" (4.1.262) and "perfect soul" (1.2.31) allow him to achieve the "full fortune" (1.1.66). Here, Janet Adelman maintains that "the extent to which Othello's fullness and solidity are the objects of Iago's envy can be gauged by the extent to which he works to replicate his own self-division in Othello." (Adelman, 1997, p. 128)

This argument can be supported by recent work on Shakespeare and religion by Eric S. Mallin. In his book *Godless Shakespeare* (2007), Mallin traces Shakespeare's attitude towards religion. He argues that despite the prevailing Biblical imaginary and religious language, Shakespeare was against orthodox Christianity. Shakespeare, however, was in favour of spirituality and not a secular rational state. At the beginning of his book, after admitting his suspicious "about Shakespeare's lack of assurance in the God and entrenched myths of Judeo-Christian culture," he affirms that there were two ideas that Shakespeare sought to support. First "to supply entertainment rather than offence", and the belief in "an occult world, one cheerfully or

menacingly beyond rationality. . . .
Specifically, he buys into the notion of
the soul" (9-10).

3.2, Iago's Attacked Superiority and his Absolute Belief in
the Power of Will:

"the most delightful thing to such a man would be
something that gave an extreme satisfaction of power and
superiority...and the moment most dangerous to such a
man would be one when his sense of superiority had met
with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced
by resentment, while at the same time he saw an
opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the
very persons who had affronted it" (Bradley, 1951, p. 94-
95)

Iago is an egoistic, self-centred person
who seeks to maintain for himself the
most beautiful image, amount of
fortune, and social rank at any cost.
When he fails to achieve his goals,
however, he conspires to spoil the
pleasure and fortune of those whom he
deemed as more fortunate. Iago's
conspiracy aims not only to spoil the
pleasure of his enemies but also it
strengthens his sense of superiority
over them.

In the beginning, Iago starts satiating
his hunger for the sense of superiority
by manipulating his victims and
enjoying the sense of being able to
manipulate them. He knows exactly
when to use the right words that direct
his victims to the directions he wishes.
"[Iago] uses suspicion, hints, affirms by
denying, covers his traces, forestalls
criticism, and blurs the contours of
reality" (Omer & Da Verona, p. 3).

For instance, Iago understands the
psychology of Othello and chooses
cunningly the words which could arouse
his mind, abetting him to suspect his
wife's actions.

Iago said to Othello,

O, beware, my lord of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster, which doth

mock

The meat it feeds upon. (3.3. 165-67)

Another example is when Iago
describes Venetian women as unfaithful
women to hint at Desdemona's
unfaithfulness without saying it
explicitly. He says to Othello,

I [unlike you] know our country
disposition well:

In Venice, they do let God see the
pranks

They dare not show their husbands;
their best conscience

Is not to leave undone, but keep't
unknown. (3.3.201-204)

Also, Iago's subtle choice of words to
hint to whatever he wants the other to
get can be clearly seen when Iago says
to Othello, "She did deceive her father,
marrying you" (III. iii. 206). Here Iago
reminds Othello of what Desdemona
did previously and to arouse his mind
to think of his wife's behaviour.

Another interesting example is when
Iago says to Othello, "I hear [Cassio]
say, 'Sweet Desdemona...let us hide
our loves!'" and "Such a handkerchief I
am sure it was your wife's -did I today
see Cassio wipe his beard with" (III. iii.
416-417, 434-436). Iago chose
Desdemona's handkerchief to prove her
infidelity, to arouse Othello's jealousy
and to send him over the edge. As a
reaction to Iago's words, Othello says,
"I'll tear her all to pieces!" (III. iii.
428).

The choice of the handkerchief itself is
of a significant meaning for Othello
because it was the first gift he ever gave
to Desdemona and therefore the symbol
of their love. In this context, Omer and
Verona argue that symbols are very
significant in everyone's life (10) and
therefore, "The handkerchief is the
attention-narrowing hypnotic symbol of
profaned love." (11)

Although Iago's manipulation of
Othello's mind leads Othello to fall into
a pitfall of jealousy that ended up in
murdering Desdemona and the
destruction of Othello's and
Desdemona's lives, Iago did not show
any regret or remorse. On the contrary,
he was happy and his happiness was
inspired by his success in manipulating
Othello to prove for himself his own
sense of power over him. Here, one
can agree with Bradley who argues that
the irresistible sense of superiority is the
real unconscious reason for Iago's
happiness at the misery of his victims.

Bradley gave the example of the person
bullying his wife or children even with
the fact that he loves them most or the

other who tortures a frog without any reason. Such a person enjoys watching the suffering of the other because their suffering proves his victory over them (Bradley, 1951, p. 95)

Bradley's aforementioned argument manifests itself once again in Iago's extreme happiness after his success in ruining Cassio's reputation. Iago says, "Pleasure and action make the hours seem short" (2.2.373).

Another good example of Iago's desire to manipulate the other to assert his sense of superiority manifested itself in the manipulation of Roderigo whom he, Iago, repeatedly asks to "Put money in thy purse ... fill thy purse with money" (1.3.340, 348) and he could receive enough jewels and gold from Roderigo but he, Iago, never shows any delight in this money which asserts that Iago was only interested in proving his sense of superiority and his ability to exploit and fool those around him. He repeats, "Put money in thy purse," and then adds, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (1.3.381).

In this context and reading Iago as a character which has an extreme belief in the power of the will and self-control to achieve its own goals, Soellner claims that Shakespeare was interested in the issue of the power of will as a feature of the modern individuals that differs from that of the Mediaeval devout Catholics. For Soellner, Iago stands for the new acquired of personality which emerged as a result of a new approach towards life that was developing at Shakespeare's time. One can see Soellner's aforementioned argument in Iago's view of a person as "the product of his will". A belief that leads him to liberate himself from old "Christian humanism" and represent the modern individual (Soellner, 1972, p. 261).

Iago says to Roderigo:

'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either have it sterile with

idleness or manur'd with industry—why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion. (I.iii.320-31)

Iago's aforementioned quotation reflects his devoid of emotions and his contempt for a person like Roderigo, who allows himself to be dominated by emotions, which led to his injury. Iago reproaches Roderigo when he declares that he suffers from his unrequited love for Desdemona on the ground that Iago's belief that "It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.337-8) that causes Roderigo to be so injured.

Nonetheless, there are critics who interpreting Iago's motives and actions in human terms. For example, in the *Apologetic of Evil: The Case of Iago* (2009), Richard Raatzsch argues that we do not have to ignore the fact that Iago is a fictional character. For Raatzsch, Iago is a monster and that we cannot suppose that his psychology can represent that of a real human. He goes on to argue that Iago can be a version of a human but his evil is so extreme that can stand for an ordinary human category. (Raatzsch, 2009).

IV. CONCLUSION

Iago is the most complex character amongst Shakespeare's villains. His vicious actions lack clear motives and it is even suggested that Iago was doing evil for its own sake. Moreover, his opinions of the people around him, most of the time, contradict themselves. This has made the character of Iago to be regarded as an unsolved riddle yet to be understood. But when we read the character of Iago through the psychoanalysis of the narcissist, one can claim that Iago's actions are motivated by his unconditional "self-love". The narcissist seeks to sustain their desirable self-reflections, whatever the consequences would be. This explains why Iago pretended to be honest and gained a loveable unique image amongst his followers but turned the lives of all those whom he knows best into hell when his self-honour

was attacked by the choice of Cassio to be Othello's captain. On the grounds that these people dared to attack his pride and to treat him unjustly, and above all they were more fortunate than him. Therefore he plotted to destroy their fortune and pleasure, without any sense of guilt for his misdeeds and his former friends became his bitter enemies. Finally, one can not affirm that Iago can be a representation the modern rational individuals and their belief in the power of their will as claimed by some critics since other critics and scholars would convincingly argue that Iago can not be more than an imagined character that exceeds all capacities and skills of a modern individual. . (Raatsch, 2009).

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